



BETTER BOOKS FOR CHILDREN —KEYNOTE ADDRESS

—MANORAMA JAFa*

India has the distinction of bringing out the first ever collection of stories for children. The *Panchatantra* is believed to have been composed over 2,000 years ago. Many of the stories have existed as an oral tradition for a much longer time. Traditional literature has also existed in the form of nursery rhymes, folk tales, fantasy stories based on classics, mythology and stories connected with various religions. In fact, the institution of story-telling has strong roots in the social fabric of Indian society. The traditional literature in India has continued to serve as a rich resource for present day literature for children. At the same time, the hold of tradition has rendered our modern literature backward looking.

True, we have strong traditions. Also true, we have a rich literature from the past.

But the modern creative literature and its process of growing has been too slow. We have been doing little for it and a visit to a Book Fair brings home this stark reality.

India produces about 17,000 titles a year and is the 17th largest book producer in the world. Out of these, only 200 titles are books for children. There are about 11,000 publishers in the country, but only eleven are exclusive publishers of children's books. One should consider this against the background of 102 million school-going children between the ages of 6-17 years. Sure enough, there is a vast readership out there, but there are not enough books for them.

Children's literature is a development of recent times and is still in its infancy in our country. We have yet to develop enough books that can claim to have originality

*Mrs. Manorama Jafa is the Secretary-General of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children. She also edits its quarterly journal, *WRITER AND ILLUSTRATOR*—the only professional journal on children's literature published in India. She has written 28 books for children and a book on the craft of writing entitled *WRITING FOR CHILDREN*. Through her workshops for writers which she has been organizing since 1977 in India and neighbouring countries, she has trained a large number of writers. She has pioneered a movement for creative writing and better books for children in the country.

and the self-expression of vibrant authorship. Very few books are imaginatively written, attractively illustrated, beautifully designed and well published. Some obvious questions come to mind:

- Why are children's books not coming out in large numbers?
- Why is there a dearth of good writers and illustrators?
- Why are there so few really good editors?
- Why do publishers feel shy of publishing good books for children?

Such questions do strike us again and again. It seems that we have yet to recognize the special needs of a child and the contribution good books can make to the development of a child.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE NEEDS A SEPARATE IDENTITY

Children's literature is an unrecognized field of literature in the country. It continues to be treated as a childish affair. The guardians of adult literature are its guardians also, and they have not looked after it. All the prestigious institutions connected with the development of literature in the country have either ignored children's literature or at best remained content with paying it lip service.

The organizations connected with children's books are largely under the care of the same people who either handle the text book programmes or books for adults. Text books are part of the established system of education and remain the focus of attention, but creative children's literature does not receive adequate attention and lingers in the dark shadows. It receives only marginal support and funding. The consequences are there for all to see.

School text books impart information and knowledge which are an essential part of education. The other part and an equally important endeavour, is releasing the hidden creative potential of the young

minds. The right type of books can fire the imagination of a child and take him into the wonderful world of fact or fiction which he never knew before. Unfortunately, we have yet to develop such kinds of books in adequate numbers. These books are required to be more rich in content, either true to nature or fantasy, indeed responding to a child's keen and fresh perceptions. This literature has little in common with text books except the audience. There is, therefore, an urgent need to treat children's literature as a separate programme and give it a separate identity. We must recognize and reaffirm our faith that this literature enriches life, provides endless joy and entertainment, promotes creativity, shapes young minds and the value system and therefore, must have a standing of its own.

What we are seeking in this Seminar is the recognition that children's books need a home where they could grow in freedom outside the shadow of the banyan tree of text books or adult literature.

A children's book draws heavily on the creativity of the writer, just as a performing artist excels in his creativity. The product of his effort may look small, but so is a piece of jewellery or a painting. I propose that children's books should be considered in the larger perspective and be treated as a part of the country's culture.

THE WRITER AND THE ILLUSTRATOR

A writer is a central figure in the development of a book and there is a need to develop new talent. The writers and illustrators of children's books should be encouraged to stay in the field and should be provided opportunity to get their work published.

Training of writers and illustrators is a long felt need. Though occasional workshops have been held for training of writers by different organizations, there is a

need to organize this more meaningfully. There are no training facilities anywhere for the illustrators of children's books. The art colleges could perhaps begin by setting up a few special courses for children's book illustrators. Award-winning books from other countries could be exhibited from time to time and well-known artists, writers, editors and specialists of children's books from other countries may visit our country, interact with our writers, illustrators and editors and share their experiences and ideas.

Here I should mention a special contribution of Mr. Shankar who established the Children's Book Trust. The Children's Book Trust has become a trend-setter and set high standards as a publisher. Mr. Shankar also founded the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children and created a new forum. The Association organizes workshops for writers, competitions for writers and illustrators and provides opportunities for the development of creative literature. But, there is need to take this work several steps ahead and provide improved opportunities for children's writers and illustrators in all parts of this large country. The foundation has been laid and it now requires to be built upon.

INCENTIVES

There is a need to provide adequate incentives. The foremost incentive is to provide recognition to writers, illustrators and publishers. Recognition will create a new environment and will give encouragement to creative people. Today, many children's books do not carry even the name of the author on the cover. The illustrator is also often ignored. The book is known as a publisher's book. The lump sum payment to the author and illustrator and securing the copyright of the text and art work by the publisher dampen the spirit of the original creators. The fruits of the success of a book are enjoyed by the publisher all

alone.

A better environment needs to be created. The writer must be given recognition for his work and this should be given generously. The names of the author and illustrator must be printed on the cover itself. The author and illustrator should have the copyright of the text and the art work respectively and the original art work should be returned to the illustrator. The present level of payment to writers and illustrators should improve and the terms of payment should be similar to what writers of adult books get.

At present, there are some awards for the writers of children's books but unfortunately there is no award for illustrators in the country. Often the awards that exist are given to books which do not measure up and are even disappointing. The value of the award is lost. To improve the standards, some prestigious awards should be established to encourage writers and illustrators and the really meritorious work should alone be awarded. And the awarded work must get enough publicity through different media.

ROLE OF MEDIA

Today, people are exposed to the electronic media. Ideas reach far and wide even before the written word reaches the readers. Let us not consider the electronic media as a threat, but as an ally in promoting the cause of children's literature.

The media can play an important role in creating awareness about books. It could review good books and bring them to the notice of children, parents, teachers and librarians. Television can base some of its programmes on published works. Discussion about children's books and interviews of writers, illustrators and publishers can be very helpful if they could be published in newspapers and magazines. All mass media institutions like radio, television and press should devote

time and space for reviews of children's books. Today, television is the most powerful medium and a good programme can promote good work, generate an urge to read the original work and also create a market for the publisher.

NEEDED MORE PUBLISHERS

There is a need for many publishers for children's books. 1979, the International Year of the Child, witnessed several publishers entering the field. However, slowly a large number of them stopped publishing creative literature. It is true, publishers have some genuine problems like steep rise in the cost of paper and the problems of marketing and distribution, but these could be resolved. After [all], publishing is all about making the books available. And the publishers have to recognize that marketing and distribution thrive on innovations. By stimulating the demand, innovative marketing can directly stimulate the production of better books. We hope this Seminar will discuss these issues.

TRANSLATION

In a country where we have 16 languages, there is plenty of scope for co-publication programmes. Good books are for all children and translations can be made available in all parts of the country. The books chosen for translation should of course be properly evaluated by children's book specialists. Good translations should also be properly reviewed and the translator of children's books should also get recognition.

READING HABIT

Promotion of the reading habit depends on the availability of books. There is need to strengthen the library movement. At present, there are about 25,000 libraries in the country. But only 500 libraries have a children's section and only 30 libraries are exclusively for children. The libraries

which exist, particularly in small towns, either do not keep children's books at all or there is a token collection and that too in the local language. A large number of schools also have libraries and they do keep children's books but the arrangements do not sufficiently encourage children to use the libraries. The role of the librarians is often limited to remaining a custodian of books rather than being a motivating force for promoting the reading habit.

CONCLUSION

I would emphasise once again the need for recognition for writers, illustrators and publishers. I wish to tell the publishing industry that they should reorient their approach and consider this field as a growth market rather than take a defensive posture.

Publishers mould the taste of readers and unless they begin to attract the young reader, there may be no readers in the future years. Even award-winning books for adult readers may lie unsold in shops.

Having said all this, one should also say that a new vigour is raising its head and the future of children's books looks bright. We have come a long way in the last forty years and some of our books can be compared to the best books being published elsewhere. But we have taken only the first steps and persistent effort will be required to reach our goal.

The new Education Policy approved in 1986 has recognized the importance of children's literature. There is a programme under 'Operation Blackboard' to provide books to over five lakh primary schools for which about 100 million books would be purchased. Supplying so many books in so many languages would certainly be an unparalleled challenge for publishers of children's books. If similar encouragement continues to be given, then it would generate a momentum and take us to new heights.

Even with the limited support that the

children's book programme gets, it should be possible to achieve much more, if we have a vision and set a direction for our growth.

In order that we have a starting point, we need to have a catalogue of best titles of children's books from all languages. Such a catalogue will offer us a model so that our writers, illustrators, editors and publishers would wish to seek to excel the standards set in the catalogue. And we will have books a shade better than what has been published in yester years. This catalogue will provide us with an instrument to compare our present efforts with those of our peers and to set new records of excellence.

AWIC

The Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children has held this torch and made every endeavour to pioneer the movement for better books for children. But

ours is a large country and we need many more such torches, and many more people to hold and support them. We need to establish link and co-operation both within the country, and also with other countries. Such co-operation alone can provide the windows through which new ideas will generate interaction and lead to the growth of good children's books.

Through the medium of this Seminar, we seek the involvement of all right thinking people. We seek recognition and fair treatment. Above all we, the writers and illustrators, need your attention, and your support. Give us what we seek and we will give you better books for children.

I also wish to state once again, that books for children should form part of culture and should be supported by the Department of Culture. This is the place for excellence. We also believe that excellence is attainable and let us together launch an Operation Excellence.

In every country children's books are the part of culture. They show an aptitude to the world and a concern for international understanding.